



# François Ozon's cinema of desire

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## Kate Ince

By the age of thirty-seven François Ozon had seven features and a clutch of admired short films to his credit. But in France, his reputation has taken a very different course from the one it is now starting to get from Anglophone critics, whose familiarity with (or at least exposure to) the academic discourses of cultural studies, gender and queer theory, attunes them to the centrality of sexuality to Ozon's *oeuvre*. Ozon's films to date have oscillated between the exuberant and satirical send-ups of bourgeois family life *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* [*8 Women*], and the contrastingly sober *Sous le sable* [*Under the Sand*] and *5 x 2*, both of which address that staple theme of French drama 'le couple' – an oscillation that has made it possible for critics to polarise his output and make some damagingly judgemental dismissals of key elements of what I am calling his 'cinema of desire'. Frédéric Bonnaud, for example, has progressively reviewed the feature films for the Parisian culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, and in 2001, after the international release of *Sous le sable*, saw his overview of Ozon's work to date translated for the leading American journal *Film Comment*, under the title 'François Ozon: wannabe *auteur* makes good'.<sup>1</sup> Bonnaud's article claims that in *Sous le sable*, Ozon has successfully adopted a 'calmer, more suggestive, unforced approach' in comparison to his previous 'youthful efforts', and finally 'found his voice' (Bonnaud 2001: 55), and goes on to set up a Manichaean opposition between Ozon's 'youthful' and 'mature' film-making. One particular shot of *Regarde la mer* [*See the sea*] – the protagonist brushing her teeth with a toothbrush that has recently been dipped in a toilet bowl of excrement – is accused of

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<sup>1</sup> The piece was published in French in *Les Inrockuptibles* No. 324, pp.28-31.

crudity, heavy-handedness and a ‘terrible lapse in taste’ (I shall show later how Ozon’s ‘tasteless’ interest in dirt and excessive, farcically performed sexual scenarios are essential parts of his filmic universe), and in *Sitcom* Bonnaud finds ‘shameless caricature’, ‘shock value’ and ‘frantically and indiscriminately piled up’ comic effects (ibid: 54). In addressing Ozon’s *oeuvre* up to *5 x 2* (2004) in this chapter, one of my aims is to show that the polarisation of it and consequent condemnation of Ozon’s ‘immaturity’ typified by Bonnaud’s criticism<sup>2</sup> has served to mask Ozon’s originality as France’s first mainstream queer director.

During the 1990s, Ozon was remarked upon as an obviously ‘gay’ film maker. But although he can be seen as the most recent addition to a trend in French cinema that ‘suggests sexual fluidity in new, innovative ways’,<sup>3</sup> Ozon’s films distinguish themselves clearly from earlier gay male filmic production in France through never having gay communities as their social setting, through their absence of reference to SIDA (AIDS), and through never having overtly politicised narratives. Ozon is linked just as significantly to cinematic traditions, French and international, by the homage to Rainer Werner Fassbinder constituted by his filming of a Fassbinder play in *Gouttes d’eau sur pierres brûlantes* [*Water Drops on Burning Rocks*], and by the ‘Buñuelian’ subversiveness of *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, films which, as Jonathan Romney observes, represent a singular queering of the tradition of surrealist subversion of the bourgeoisie (Romney 1999: 56).

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<sup>2</sup> As Andrew Asibong states, it has become ‘the prevailing view’ that ‘Ozon’s ongoing obsession with transgression...has fortunately given way to allegedly more mature projects’ (Asibong 2005: 203).

<sup>3</sup> Schilt suggests that André Téchiné can be regarded as a precursor of this tendency, and lists a number of other key works that make it up (Schilt p.1).

In *Une robe d'été* [*Summer Dress*] (1996), the first of Ozon's shorts to meet with critical acclaim, a young man on holiday with his boyfriend is irritated by the latter's singing and dancing along to a song by French pop icon Sheila. The young man, Sébastien, rides his bike to the beach, where a young Spanish woman, Lucia, having introduced herself by asking for a light, invites him to go and have sex in the woods. When he returns to the beach, Sébastien finds his clothes have been stolen, and is forced to cycle home wearing a dress lent to him by Lucia. But after initially feeling self-conscious about this, he starts to enjoy it, and when he gets home, his feminine appearance turns out to be a turn-on for his boyfriend, leading to vigorous sex in which the dress gets ripped. He sews up the tear and later returns it to Lucia, who does not want it back, and tells him 'Je te l'offre, elle peut te servir'.<sup>4</sup>

As Thibaut Schilt points out, the fluidity of sexual orientation dramatised in *Une robe d'été* is coterminous with gender identity (Schilt p.2): it is the feminine appearance of the dress that arouses the desire of the gay boyfriend. Ozon is not so much working with the Freudian understanding of 'masculine' as 'active' and 'feminine' as 'passive' – although this applies to the gay couple's sex – as suggesting that sexual orientation is only ever 'fixed' in the most provisional manner: in the course of a day, Sébastien goes from 'gay', to 'straight', to 'gay' again. In addition to lending the light-heartedness and summery guilt-free atmosphere to *Une robe d'été* that makes it so appealing, this provisionality of sexual orientation chimes with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, according to which sex acts, like speech acts and acts of dressing, contribute to a non-binary

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<sup>4</sup> 'Keep it, it might come in useful'

understanding of gender identity that includes gays, lesbians, and bi- and transsexuals. Initially set out in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which became one of the founding texts of queer theory, Butler's theory of gender performativity has now been added to by the writings of a host of other theorists and critics, some of whom focus explicitly on queer desire.

This introduction to Ozon's films will revolve around the centrality of queer desire to his cinema, and the continual performative transformations of identity worked within it. Butler's deconstruction, in *Gender Trouble*, of what she calls the 'heterosexual matrix', exposed the thoroughgoing social normativity of compulsory heterosexuality: as Tim Dean puts it, "'queer" came to stand less for a particular sexual orientation of a stigmatized erotic identity than for a critical distance from the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm' (Dean 2003: 240). 'Gay' often simply opposes straight, and 'queer' is not just an umbrella term for 'gay, lesbian and bisexual': it 'sets itself more broadly in opposition to the forces of normalization that regulate social conformity' (ibid.). In so doing, queer texts and films constitute a privileged site for the imagination and mise en scène of new social formations – the kind of 'new relational modes' envisaged by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit in their reading of Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother* (1999) (Bersani and Dutoit 2004: 103). There is a compelling parallel to be drawn between the strand of sober, melancholy (melo)drama that has developed in Ozon's work and Almodovar's *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her* (2002). The emergence of new modes of relating from the social effects of non-normative queer sexualities is an issue I shall return to throughout this chapter. First, however, the

performativity of sexuality and identity that characterises many of Ozon's films needs to be illustrated, and to do this, I turn to his early set of shorts from 1998, *Scènes de lit* [*Bed Scenes*].

## **Performative couples**

Six of the *Scènes de lit* feature heterosexual couples, compared to only two – *L'Homme idéal* [*The Ideal Man*] and *Les Puceaux* [*The Virgins*] – whose pairings are homosexual. Irony and the humour of apparent compatibility that turns sour are to the fore in *M. Propre* [*Mr Clean*<sup>5</sup>], whose male protagonist is a sort of anti-capitalist contemporary hippie opposed to all but the most necessary washing – of his body, his clothes or his living space. As he expounds this philosophy to his bed-partner she grows increasingly uneasy, then gets up and leaves, announcing that she has been an asthma sufferer since childhood. Incompatibility is also only discovered between the sheets in *L'amour dans le noir* [*Love in the Dark*], where Frank is unable to have sex with Virginie with the light on, against gender stereotyping according to her. She refuses to comply in the dark, but since he becomes aroused as soon as the light is off, gives in to his request to be allowed to masturbate at her side. His satisfaction at this heals their rift and re-establishes tenderness as they wish each other goodnight (they are obliged to spend the night together, since Virginie has missed the last métro home). The third potentially mismatched pairing of the set of films is between a fifty-two year-old woman and a nineteen year-old boy in *Madame*: despite the woman's reticence about beginning the first sexual relationship she will have had since the death of her husband five years

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<sup>5</sup> Or *Mr Sheen*, since *M. Propre* is also the brand name of the French equivalent of this cleaning product, an ironic dig at capitalist consumerism clearly intended in Ozon's title.

earlier, her refusal meets with unlikely tenacity and patience from her young partner that then turns into a kind of courtly love shivering with eroticism, as he asks simply to be allowed to kiss her hand. Meanwhile, *Tête bêche* [*Heads or Tails*], the fourth scene of the set, is unlike any of the others in featuring lovers who seem already to be an established couple (in it, foreplay consists of counting down from 100 to 69). But it turns around a number and the idea of counting in a manner that reveals the preoccupation with permutations and permutability latent in all Ozon's dramas about couples. *Scènes de lit* as a whole, whether or not it is regarded as a unified entity, has the structure of a catalogue or instructive illustration.

It is in the two scenes of the set about same-sex pairings that the space of mutable sexuality established in *Une robe d'été* of two years earlier is most clearly to the fore. The two young men of *Les Puceaux* have qualified and opposing claims to virginal status: one of them has never had sex with women, the other never with men. Any stereotypical representation of gay male sex is renounced as the two modestly opt for a kiss as the best expression of their feelings for each other. In *L'Homme idéal*, meanwhile, Ozon captures the psychic mechanism of idealisation brilliantly, as one woman takes advantage of another's vulnerable projection onto a man she has flirted with in order to declare her love for her friend (and get it reciprocated), by 'therapeutically' standing in for the wished-for male lover. In the realm of fantasy and projection, sexual/gender difference is of no consequence, and sexual orientation and identity are in sway to a love composed as much of affection and a wish to comfort as of bodily desire.



Perhaps Ozon's most extended illustration of a change of lovers that is also a shift from a heterosexual to a homosexual orientation occurs to Luc, in *Les Amants criminels* [*Criminal Lovers*]. After the murder of their schoolfellow Saïd to which Alice has incited him, and their subsequent flight from home, the lovers are imprisoned by a woodsman ['l'homme des bois'], who has seen them bury (and then dug up) Saïd's body, and decided to take advantage of the criminality he has witnessed. While Alice is locked in the earthen cellar of his hut with Saïd's body and starved of food and drink, Luc is shackled but also fed chunks of meat by the woodsman, who explains, albeit enigmatically, that he likes girls just to be well-muscled, but prefers his boys 'nice and plump' [*bien dodus*]. As Luc lies next to him on his iron-framed bed, the woodsman unzips the top layers of his clothes and starts to masturbate him, Luc's breathing indicating that this gives him pleasure. Later that night, when Luc is interned in the cellar for having started to follow Alice's instructions to kill the sleeping woodsman with a kitchen knife, he is unable to acknowledge to her satisfaction at the orgasm he has had. Later still, he is hauled back upstairs for full intercourse which evidently also satisfies him. Although Luc nonetheless takes the opportunity presented to him shortly afterwards to 'escape' from the hut with Alice (to certain further confinement, since the police have had time to track the pair down), he reveals his attachment to their jailer by shouting 'Leave him alone!' [*Laissez-le!*] repeatedly to the police, as they arrest and brutally kick his first male lover. *Les Amants criminels* was much criticised on its release (Schilt calls the woodsman 'paedophile' (Schilt p.4)), and it is hard to avoid concluding that this is because of its illustration of the inextricable relationship of sex and power: without his

enforced confinement and separation from Alice, Luc would not have discovered his primary sexual orientation.

Both *Les Amants criminels* and the eight miniatures that make up the *Scènes de lit* show Ozon ringing the changes on the forms of the couple, dramatising trajectories of erotic desire that prove amusing or touching, while indicating, most strongly in *L'Homme idéal*, the performativity of sexual orientation. In Ozon's other feature films, fluidity of orientation is also to the fore in *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, in the characters of Léopold and Franz, who have respectively lived and been drawn to a life of normative heterosexuality, but not been defined by it, Léopold in repeated relationships with younger men, Franz in meeting Léopold. An adaptation of a play by Fassbinder, *Gouttes d'eau* is a chamber piece restricted to the four characters of Léopold, Franz, Anna (Franz's ex-girlfriend) and Véra, Léopold's ex-live-in-partner. Of the six sexual relationships that might be formed between these characters, four of them actually are. Similar multiple couplings and switches in orientation abound in *8 Femmes*, where four of the eight women are either revealed to be lesbian or bisexual or give in to non-heterosexual dallying in the course of the action. Repeatedly in Ozon's dramas, the structure of the couple, heterosexual *or* homosexual, underpins the action more firmly than does normative heterosexuality, binary sexual difference, or stable sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The future towards which Ozon's films point, one might say, is a future of coupling. As Bersani and Dutoit remark of Godard's *Le Mépris*, '[the kind of presence Odysseus and Penelope and *The Odyssey* have in *Contempt*]...has nothing to do with likeness or unlikeness, but rather with the identical ontological status of both couples: that of possibility. The past, like the present, is always *waiting to be* (Bersani and Dutoit 2004: 66).

## Queering the family

From his earliest short *Photo de famille* [*Family Photo*] (1988), the family has been central to Ozon's cinema. (And it is tempting here to change the definite article to a possessive, and say 'his family', since his parents, sister and brother are the film's cast.) Originally shot on Super-8 and without a soundtrack, *Photo de famille* gives expression to the murderous impulses latent in a middle-class, nuclear family almost casually: after finishing watching a movie together, the mother, father, son and daughter eat supper then return to their various activities. The daughter does her homework, the father dozes on the sofa: the son, however, brings fatally drugged coffee to his mother, stabs his sister with a pair of scissors, then smothers his father with a cushion. Next, he lines up the bodies on the same sofa on which they sat together to watch the movie at the start of the film, sets the self-timer on his camera, and takes the family photo of the film's title, in which his beaming smile and straight sitting posture are juxtaposed with the melodramatic grimaces and contorted bodies of his parents and sibling. (Itself an echo of a shot in Buñuel's *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* [*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*], this scene also anticipates an extremely similar one in *Sitcom* where the bodies of the mother, son and daughter, along with some of the family's hangers-on, are lined up on a sofa after being shot, in what turns out to be a fantasy on the part of the father.)

Melodrama is central to *Photo de famille*, as it will also be to *Sitcom* and *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*. Camerawork and shot length are calculated to emphasise the drama of the unrealistically quick and efficient murders (no blood is seen when the sister is

stabbed), and the son, played by Guillaume Ozon and clearly some sort of autobiographical persona for the director, exaggerates his gestures and his expressions to suit, making them resemble countless familiar moments from horror films. *Victor* (1993), another short that revolves around the central character's killing of his parents, this time seemingly an unpremeditated and desperate act (Victor has a gun in his own mouth in the first scene of the film), demonstrates the murderous violence of Oedipal relationships and their link to sexuality more explicitly: once his guilty fright over the murder has passed, Victor can masturbate, is included in foreplay and sex between the family maid Julie and her lover, and is last seen – once he has buried his parents' bodies in the garden – catching a train, presumably into the city away from the parental home, a kind of gothic *château*. He is wearing just trousers and a vest, and a jacket hangs casually over his shoulder; he looks at ease with himself and like a young man with a future, no longer the anguished youth with nowhere to turn bourgeois family existence had reduced him to.

Ozon's blackly humorous treatment of death in both *Photo de famille* and *Victor* is potentially more interesting than the films' Oedipal narratives: bodies piled up on the sofa in *Photo de famille*, and the way Victor drags his parents' corpses around the house and garden with him, arranging them in grotesque poses, show the materiality of death helping the son to adjust to his new-found freedom, whilst also celebrating it. The dead father's body figures similarly in *La Petite mort* (1995), whose protagonist Paul's damaged sense of self is at the root of his preference for having himself photographed at the moment of orgasm, and who photographs his father's corpse with power-hungry hastiness, desiring to repair the damage done to his self-esteem by the unloving parent.

But if Ozon's fathers have to be murdered or their death celebrated in the early films, the death of the father at the end of *La Petite mort* gives way to a repeated absence of father figures from no less than four of the families in the films that follow: in *Regarde la mer* Sasha's husband is away working until he returns to make the shocking discovery of her mutilated body; in *Sitcom* the father is 'absent' despite being physically present (a contradiction I shall explain); in *8 Femmes* the family patriarch is presumed dead until his actual death occurs at the end of the film, and *Swimming Pool* uncovers the hidden past and illegitimate daughter of a London publisher who is absent from most of the action of the film, since his unacknowledged daughter lives in France, where he owns a second home.

*Sitcom*, the first full-length feature that gained Ozon his reputation as the new 'bad boy' (Bonnaud 2001: 54) of French cinema, does indeed play with the televisual genre of the sitcom, in its unflinching display of the private, emotional and sexual lives of a group of characters. As Schilt summarises, 'the film's intentions are clearly to subvert and transgress the norms of middle-class *bonne société*, as it explicitly presents or suggests every perversion and taboo in the book: homosexuality, interracial adultery, sadomasochism, incest, paedophilia, group sex, even bestiality' (Schilt p.3). This unleashing of non-normative sexualities and desires on the family follows the father's 'adoption' as the family pet of a white laboratory rat, an act that horrifies his wife, played with brilliant deadpan humour by Evelyne Dandry, but delights his son Nicolas and daughter Sophie. The same evening, Nicolas announces to the family at dinner that he is gay, and that night, Sophie attempts suicide by jumping from an upstairs window, an

‘accident’ that leaves her paralysed from the waist down and transforms her into an embittered and sadistic dominatrix, confined to a wheelchair in which she is attended by boyfriend David, whose devotion to her now extends to masochistic role-play. The family home, pictured at the start of the film in exaggerated sunny suburban tranquillity complete with cuckoo, becomes the scene of orgies advertised in the local paper and held in Nicolas’ room, then – finally - incest as Nicolas is seduced by his mother, desperate to re-unite her disintegrating family by showing some of the love she diagnoses it as lacking.

The *dramatis personae* of both *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* is a classically patriarchal family, in which gender roles and generational differences function according to the highly familiar dynamics of the bourgeoisie. In *Sitcom*, it is only during the therapy programme the mother attends with her children as the last resort in her effort to save family unity that she hits on the interpretation that the rat is to blame for the family’s disintegration, upon which she phones her husband instructing him to kill it. The equivalence of the father to the rat is finally made explicit when, after putting it in the family’s microwave then consuming its charred body, he is transformed into a giant, very un-cute version of the pet. Freud’s equation of oral and cannibalistic desires to psychic identification is literalised: the father ‘is’ the rat, its destructive ‘influence’ on the family is his own, and once his wife, son and daughter have confronted and dealt with his malevolence, they can move on, living new and different lives because the dominating, restricting hold of patriarchal law over them is at an end. ‘To lose...the paternal function at once dependent upon and incommensurable with any real father, is to lose the Law that governs and

stabilises the attributing of identities' (Bersani and Dutoit 2004: 103). This hold is illustrated during the film by the father's withdrawn intellectualism and complete refusal to engage with his family emotionally: when Nicolas announces he is gay, the father treats the assembled company to a lecture on homosexuality in ancient Greece, and when his wife calls the crisis meeting to suggest that they all attend a programme of therapy together, he simply shambles back to his crossword, saying it will doubtless do the three of them good, but is simply of no relevance to him.

As a vehicle for its female actresses Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Emmanuelle Béart, Fanny Ardant, Isabelle Huppert, Virginie Ledoyen, Ludivine Sagnier, and Firmine Richard, *8 Femmes* pays homage to and indulges its stars, offering them each a musical number in the form of a French pop single from a past decade, and decking them out in gorgeous costumes that take their inspiration from 1950s Hollywood. Ozon says of the film that 'the dress of Fanny Ardant was a reference to Ava Gardner and Cyd Cherisse. Catherine Deneuve was more Lana Turner or Marilyn Monroe', and specifies that he was seeking to revive the idea of Technicolor (Ozon 2002: 3). As Jean-Marc Lalanne summarises, 'François Ozon has made *the* most deliberately 'meta' film in French cinema' (Lalanne 2002: 82) that continually references both Hollywood panache and glamour and his actresses' past performances in French films: Deneuve utters a line to Ledoyen spoken to her by one of Truffaut's male characters in both *La Sirène du Mississippi* and *Le Dernier Métro*, and Darrieux and Deneuve re-play an exaggerated and crueler version of the conflictual mother-daughter relationship they acted in the films of Jacques Demy (ibid.). *8 Femmes* could be read, I thought when I first saw it, as an

opulent and utterly knowing pastiche of 1950s French studio cinema. But if the film is a vibrant, colour-laden and highly self-conscious pastiche of the 'cinéma de papa' as this description suggests, it is not one whose plot should be dismissed as lightweight and 'transparent' (Lalanne 2002: 82). The continual far-fetched narrative twists effected by the women's divulgence of their respective relationships with Marcel (who was husband, son-in-law, step-father, real father, brother, lover and employer to them, often playing more than one role to each woman), and the development of their relationships with each other that results from these revelations amounts to an acting-out of every possible desiring relation except male homosexuality. Chanel, the black servant, is in love with bisexual sister of the patriarch Pierrette, who rejects her for her lowly social status, but whose rivalry with Gaby, Marcel's wife, turns momentarily into a lipstick lesbian embrace in high style: meanwhile, Louise the maid is revealed to have been the lover of both her former (domestic) mistress and Marcel, and symbolically swaps her social inferiority for perverse sexual power by letting her hair down and transforming her maid's attire into a seductive 'little black dress' complete with fishnet stockings and garter. Patriarchal power, shored up by the incest taboo and the taboo against homosexuality, gives way to the sexual order that ensues when the norms of compulsory heterosexuality are comprehensively queered. But when it turns out that the entire murder plot is a charade orchestrated by the film's youngest character Catherine, Marcel's daughter, and that he is alive and well behind the locked door of his room, he shoots himself in the head anyway, unable to live with or in the new post-patriarchal regime Catherine's staging of his death has unmasked.



Unlike *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* does not feature a family of characters. There are intimations of sadomasochism in the relationship between 50 year-old worldly-wise businessman Léopold and 20 year-old ingénue Franz, whom Léopold seduces after bringing him home to his flat, and out of the bedroom Léopold is unequivocally the dominant partner: Franz's life with him is soon nothing more than a domestic routine of cooking, cleaning and waiting for his lover to return from work. Depressed and isolated after six months of Léopold's foul-tempered egotism, Franz turns to his former girlfriend Anna when she visits to tell him another man has asked her to marry him. But Anna is drawn in by Léopold's sexual prowess just as Franz himself was (Léopold admitted his bisexuality to Franz at the outset of their relationship, stating that he had previously lived with a woman for seven years, but 'preferred boys'), and Franz takes poison, reduced to suicidal despair by Léopold's obliviousness to his love. As he lies dying, Franz is attended only by Véra, Léopold's former partner, whom we learn is a male-to-female transsexual who became a woman just in order to please Léopold, and has been unable to free herself from the orbit of Léopold's desire. But although *Gouttes d'eau* does not feature a family of characters, Léopold might be considered a kind of father figure in the drama: he is a generation older than Franz and Anna, and his seduction of Franz is a response to the fantasy of seduction by a father-figure Franz has just narrated to him. If Léopold's status as father-figure is acknowledged, then dominant, egotistic, malevolent *paternal* sexuality becomes the motor force and dramatic atmosphere of the film, and the desire that drives it to its tragic conclusion.

Because of their settings in middle class *bonne société* and the *haute bourgeoisie* respectively, and their high degree of theatricality, these three films have been assumed to lack any dimension of critique.<sup>7</sup> But it is precisely in their theatricality that *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes* and *Gouttes d'eau* do contain a critique of patriarchy. The first two films are comic, the third is tragic, resulting in repetition and a reinforcement of the *status quo*. 'The symbolic [symbolic law] cannot be *seriously* contested' (Bersani and Dutoit 2004: 104): it is in and with comedy that Ozon goes the furthest towards showing new 'modes of relation', new social formations. The interest for women and queers of all kinds of Ozon's opening up of the family is clear, and its potential exciting.

### **Transformative spaces: at home and on the beach**

Throughout Ozon's films to date, two spaces form the scene of the action with particular frequency: one is the home or domestic interior, the other is the beach. In *Sitcom*, *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* and *8 Femmes*, the home becomes a stage on which personal and family melodramas are played out. Theatricality characterises all three films and marks the genesis of two of them:<sup>8</sup> the rule of unity of place applies completely to *Gouttes d'eau* and *8 Femmes*, and to very nearly the whole of *Sitcom*.

Turning first to *Gouttes d'eau*, it is soon evident that Ozon is putting this containment within domestic space to meaningful use. As Adam Bingham notes, 'A recurrent composition in the film has characters seen through apartment windows from the outside with the camera looking in. It is a common Sirkian motif that suggests entrapment, as

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<sup>7</sup> Bingham terms *8 Femmes* 'Ozon's most glossy, shallow and inconsequential film to date' (Bingham p.6).

<sup>8</sup> *Gouttes d'eau* adapts Fassbinder's play of the same name, *Tropfen auf heiße Steine*, and *8 Femmes* is loosely based on an insignificant boulevard play by a dramatist called Robert Thomas.

well as connoting distance when Franz and Léopold are seen in separate windows' (Bingham, pp.4-5). The camera's remove to a position outside the apartment first occurs as Franz, forcefully encouraged by Léopold in the prelude to his seduction, tells Léopold of his brushes with homosexuality at boarding school and his fantasy about being 'entered like a girl' by an imaginary step-father with muscled legs and a hairy chest. It occurs again in daylight and driving rain, at a typical moment in the boredom Franz experiences from Monday to Friday when Léopold is away doing his job as a salesman, a third time as Franz starts to seduce Anna by imitatively repeating the same routine of seduction Léopold used on him, and a final time at the very end of the film, as Véra tries but fails to open the middle window of the three, and the camera recedes into the darkness outside as she scrabbles helplessly for air and freedom from the imprisonment to which she has voluntarily returned. The entrapment communicated by the shot is Franz's, Anna's and Véra's entrapment in Léopold's domestic space, which is not literal (Franz must have left the apartment in order to carry out his duties as 'housewife', and we are told at one point that he has had a part-time job, although none of these activities occur in filmic space), but equates to the passive and dominated role they all play in relation to Léopold. As the *Cahiers du cinéma* review observed, '[Theatre] is the ideal device to express these amorous dynamics – the power- and game-playing, the domination and submission, the seductive flattery and the betrayed abandon' (Higuinen 2000: 40). Concomitantly, it is the theatrical containment of filmic space to the domestic interior – Ozon's use of the principle of unity of place in his film – that makes that space into the 'space' of sexuality, a pre-eminently queer space in view of Léopold's and Franz's bisexuality and Véra's transsexual transformation from man to woman.

In *Sitcom*, the action never leaves the family home except in a brief shot of a swimming pool where the mother, Nicolas and Sophie swim in reinvigorating harmony as part of the family therapy programme she has brought them on, and in the final, funeral scene for the *pater familias*. The near-total confinement of the film's action to the set that is the home means that, as in *Gouttes d'eau*, domestic space contains sexualities and desires: it is the scene of sexuality, straight, gay, sadomasochistic and incestuous. In *Sitcom*, however, the violent (if silent) paternal rule over the home that equates it with the space of patriarchy is in terminal comic crisis. Although the location of the final scene is dictated by the film's narrative, it is also significant that the action shifts at this point from highly theatricalised cinema to a naturalistic, open-air location – a graveyard, but a sunny one. The dramatic and blackly comic excesses of *Sitcom* are also marked as parodic by the opening shot of the film, a lavish red theatre curtain that goes up on the action, revealing the bourgeois family home as the stage Ozon makes it into.

Unity of place reigns entirely supreme again in *8 Femmes*, whose origins in a boulevard play Ozon describes as a positive advantage rather than a problem ('The story had a theatrical style, and that was something I wanted to keep', (Ozon 2002: 3)). As the film's Christmas-time murder mystery builds up around the death of the family patriarch (what drew Ozon to the play's narrative was that 'it put eight women together in the same place, where one man has been killed. Within that structure, I knew I'd be able to put in my observations about women, family, and so on' (ibid.)), attention is repeatedly drawn to the restriction and enclosure of the action. Catherine Deneuve's character Gaby remarks

that the deepening snow means they are effectively ‘in Siberia, cut off from the world’, and shortly afterwards it is discovered that wires have been cut that render the phone and the car unusable. The set for most of the film’s action is the grand and spacious living area that forms the figurative and literal centre of the country mansion, from the back of which a grand red-carpeted staircase sweeps up past the patriarch’s room, located on a sort of mezzanine level, to the women’s rooms. Although some scenes are filmed in these rooms and in the kitchen, the central hallway constitutes the principal stage, from and onto which exits and entrances are made. Characters are confined to the house and its grounds: although some of the women exit from the hallway-stage, nobody succeeds in leaving the estate at any point in the film.

If the equivalence of domestic to ‘sexual’ space demonstrated in *Gouttes d’eau* is extended to *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, it becomes clear that by containing the action of his two most ‘taboo-busting’ comedies (Romney 1999: 56) in a newly – or differently – theatricalised bourgeois interior, Ozon achieves a focus on the home that politicises otherwise chaotically subversive material. A tragic prison in *Gouttes d’eau*, because of Ozon’s fidelity to Fassbinder’s original plot, the home in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* becomes a place open to a radical transformation of patriarchy, a queer and unpredictable space that invites new and unspecified social formations.

Although none of Ozon’s films privileges the beach as a location to the same extent that *Gouttes d’eau*, *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* do the family home, a beach is an important locus of the drama in *Une robe d’été*, *Regarde la mer*, *Sous le sable* and *5 x 2*. In *Une robe*

*d'été*, it is both the place where Sébastien is seduced, and the place from which his clothes are stolen while he and Lucia have sex in the woods. The theft of his usual clothes equates to the 'theft' of his habitual masculine identity, and in this way equates to his first heterosexual seduction. This exactly parallels what happens to Sasha in *Regarde la mer*, when, missing sex during her husband's absence, she wanders into the woods in search of substitute pleasure with one of the gay men she and Tatiana, the *routarde* who is helping her to look after her baby, have seen cruising there. (In an earlier scene on the beach, Sasha tries in vain to find some time for a different kind of pleasure, reading, but is prevented by her toddler's need for attention.) In both films, sex on – or near – the beach is with a non-habitual partner, and involves a mismatch of sexual orientation. The beach, in other words, figures a space of liminality in these two films: it is the zone in which the fluidity or flexibility of sexual identity that applies to so many of Ozon's characters is exercised, a place of experimentation and of play.

A similar observation can be made of *Sous le sable*, although the shift in identity to which Marie is subjected on the beach is primarily psychic and social. For her, the beach is a site of loss, even of trauma, since within the space of the hour in which her husband disappears, apparently into the sea, she ceases to be the devoted wife who has returned to this place with her husband year after year, and enters a period of loss and melancholia from which she does not recover in the time-frame of the film. When she returns to their seaside home much later, to identify what may well be her husband's body, finally recovered from the sea, she refuses to recognise as his the personal effects found with it. She then walks to the beach, where she sits on the sand and sobs openly, before spotting a

man standing some distance away towards whom she runs, still vainly searching for Jean, hoping that he is alive. Marie's loss of her habitual identity seems to be enduring, and is symptomatised in melancholic denial, imagined visions of her vanished husband that are shared with the viewer of *Sous le sable* to such unusual dramatic effect.

The arrestingly beautiful image from 5 x 2 posted on Ozon's website before the film's French release in September 2004, of its protagonists Gilles and Marion walking down a Sardinian beach to take a first swim in the sea together, ensures that the beach is a significant location in the film. It is unpopulated, though presumably only a short distance from the holiday camp where Gilles, vacationing with his partner Valérie, and Marion, who has come to the resort alone after a female friend has let her down at the last minute, re-encounter one another (they work for the same company, but are only slightly acquainted). After dinner *à trois* the previous evening, followed by a resort entertainment in which Gilles, seemingly uncharacteristically, has made a bit of a fool of himself on stage, the attraction between Gilles and Marion is clear to all three of them. Rather than go on the hike in the hills with Valérie they had planned, Gilles has sought Marion out on the beach, which thereby becomes a site of transition for both of them – from one relationship to another for him, and from the single status she has had for four months to 'attached' for her. The beach of 5 x 2 figures fluidity and undecidability in another way too, though, since, in the version of the film released in cinemas, the start of the couple's relationship is the last of the five episodes we see, but the DVD also offers a re-edited version in which the episodes play in chronological order. The beach is the beginning but also the end: it indicates an end and a beginning for Gilles and Marion, and holds a

similar double status for the film-text of 5 x 2. As such, it is a figure of undecidability that echoes (if it does not exactly overlap with) the significance the beach has as a ludic space, a place of experimental pleasure, in *Une robe d'été* and *Regarde la mer*.

### **Dirty and clean: the threat of the other**

As might be expected of dramas about shifts in identity and sexual orientation, Ozon's films highlight oppositions of all kinds. One of the most prominent recurring binary oppositions is between cleanliness, associated with states of safety and stability, and dirt, which is linked to conditions of danger and infection. Tatiana, the *routarde* who enters the life of Sasha and her baby in *Regarde la mer*, stands out in the washed-clean setting of Sasha's husband's seaside cottage because of her dark, dirty, ragged clothes, which she never seems to remove – wearing them even on the beach with the baby, when Sasha is sunbathing in a bikini. The grubbiness of Tatiana's body is highlighted in a shot of just her lower legs when she is sitting on the toilet, her very off-white pants around her ankles, with the bruises and blemishes acquired from a routine of hiking and camping clearly visible. More striking still is a shot of the contents of the toilet basin, sticky brown faeces that Tatiana has not flushed away and that contrast starkly with the bathroom's shining white enamel, as with the overwhelming cleanness of most of the film's exteriors.<sup>9</sup> The vagabond's dirtiness, along with her inexpressive demeanour and taciturn manner, signal the danger Sasha fails to suspect for far too long, a danger stemming from Tatiana's sense of the damage inflicted on her during the birth of her baby, now dead. How her body has been torn and wounded is a story too traumatic for her to tell in the

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<sup>9</sup> 'The cutting cleanness (precision) of *See the sea* is what strikes the viewer first. The framing is decided and decisive. The shots follow one another with diabolical precision, with an unfaltering sense of rhythm, impressively assured' (Jousse 1997: 66-7).



first person, but she reveals it in the scene where she suddenly asks Sasha a barrage of questions about her toddler's birth (did she have an epidural, did she need an episiotomy?), adding that she has heard that childbirth tears some women right from the vagina to the anus. Tatiana cannot have any more children, as childbirth has injured her so badly that her reproductive organs have been contaminated by the colon and its dirty, foul-smelling contents. This sense of damage and loss resulting from her injury is what drives her to murder Sasha and to kidnap her baby at the close of *Regarde la mer*, an act surprising in its suddenness and its violence.

An earlier short film from 1994, *Action Vérité* [*Truth or Dare*], figures the body's danger in a more innocent context. Ozon's world of pairs and couples finds an obvious expression in this film's eponymous game, played here by four adolescents (two of each gender), since 'Truth or Dare' is all about self-revelation, same-sex and cross-sex play, and infringing on the other's space or privacy – crossing over into his/her bodily territory. Examples of the challenges Paul, Rémy, Rose and Hélène trade range from the minor (licking a foot) to the audacious (Rose putting her hand into Hélène's knickers to tell what the smell is), but the game stops abruptly when, as she performs this dare, Rose finds menstrual blood – Hélène's first, it is clear from the expressions on all four faces – on her fingers. The social ritual of experimenting with sexual activity has inadvertently coincided with a personal rite of passage, transforming a discovery that is almost always private into one that is public, and rendering visible a taboo substance. Light-hearted yet charged adolescent play is stopped in its tracks as cognisance is taken of one of the most potent signs of the transition to adulthood and its responsibilities.

Cleanliness and dirt are also central to a third of Ozon's short films, *X2000* (1998), which takes place the morning after a party to celebrate the new millennium. A post-party atmosphere is palpable in the apartment belonging to an unnamed couple, the man of which gets out of bed first to wander around the silent rooms. Distracted by the sight of a couple making love in the window of a flat opposite, several floors below (the setting of *X2000* is Seine Saint-Denis, the outskirts of Paris, with its huge unadorned *grands ensembles* (municipal council housing)), he peers at them with such intent voyeurism that he falls off the window ledge on which he has been balancing, and breaks the glass that contained his effervescent hangover-remedy. In the meantime, his female partner, having spotted her lover's interest in another couple's physical passion and allowed a pained grimace to cross her face, unseen by him, has been relaxing in a warm bath, submerging every part of her body except her face. The man takes the shards of his broken glass to the kitchen bin, and discovers a small swarm of ants underneath and around it. Seeing the perturbation on his face as he crosses into the bathroom, the woman asks what the matter is, to which he replies simply 'Les fourmis attaquent!' [The ants are attacking!]. A close-up of a few of them on his foot follows as if to confirm this rather melodramatic diagnosis. His gloom and concern relates superficially to the ants, whose appearance on the first morning of the new millennium works more obviously in a symbolic register, expressive of the decline of passion in the couple's relationship and the difficulties it may face in the future. They are both naked in every shot of *X2000*, but passion is seen only in the flat opposite, while the absence of it between the couple in their apartment is

highlighted by the mesmerising image of communion formed by two twin brothers sharing a sleeping bag on the apartment's floor.

In *Regarde la mer*, *Action Vérité* and *X2000*, dirt, vermin and abjected body contents (faeces and menstrual blood) signal danger, decline, and fear or disgust in those who view them. *Sitcom* is alone among Ozon's films in presenting the ambiguity of such forms of life, manifested in the small white laboratory rat brought home by the family's father at the start of the film. While he, his son Nicolas and daughter Sophie are charmed by the rat, his wife is dismayed, but tolerates it because of her husband's calmly authoritarian hold over family life. Nicolas's enthrallment to the rat's ambiguous appeal (it is vermin but clean, and although cute-looking, sometimes bites), is revealed when he is called to the dinner table by his mother just after the rat's arrival, and, rather than wetting his hands, carefully directs the flow of water from the tap between his fingers, giving the appearance of obeying her request to wash his hands rather than actually doing so. Nicolas's announcement that he is gay follows directly upon his captivation by the rat's charm, while not long afterwards, later that same evening, Sophie releases the rat from its cage and allows it to crawl all over her body, evidently experiencing sexualised pleasure from the contact: the rat's appeal is uncertain but clearly connected to sexuality.

### **Dark genres, lightness of touch**

By discussing the evident importance to Ozon's cinema of unclean bodies, vermin and dirt generally, I have turned attention to his unarguable interest in death (including its connection with sex and sexuality) – what might in everyday parlance be termed the

‘darkness’ of his cinema. While some critics have sought to complain about this inclination to be psychological and dig into the ‘ugly underbelly’ of human relations,<sup>10</sup> a greater number have pursued the issue more fruitfully, via the issue of genre. The same moments and motifs I considered in the previous section of this chapter contribute to the several genres in which many of his films – particularly *Regarde la mer*, *Sitcom*, *Les Amants criminels*, *8 Femmes* and *Swimming Pool* – participate, without ever approximating to formulaic Hollywood-style ‘genre cinema’. While *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* undoubtedly owe some kind of debt to anti-bourgeois farce, neither film fits neatly inside the boundaries of a single genre: as Schilt observes, *8 Femmes* ‘is a comedy, a melodrama and a whodunit, seasoned with a pinch of the musical’ (Schilt p.4). Two other films with musical interludes are *Une robe d’été*, where Sheila’s ‘Bang bang’ makes the film’s narrative possible by temporarily coming between the two male lovers, and *Gouttes d’eau sur pierres brûlantes*, where a dance by all four actors to a Tony Holliday song relieves events that are taking a decidedly tragic turn with a couple of minutes of highly entertaining camp levity.

A non-cinematic genre that marks both *Sitcom* and *Les Amants criminels* is the fairy tale. Animals often take on human form in fairy tales, and in *Sitcom*, the rat and the father of the family become indistinguishable after he cooks and consumes it. After this, the rat’s symbolic role in the family’s fortunes moves from a realistic register into something like pantomime as the father transmogrifies into a human-sized ferocious version of the pet.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Mudede objects to being reminded ‘that violence, anger, cruelty and death all structure the moment of intercourse’ (Mudede 2000: 2-3), and freely admits that although he thinks Ozon is talented, he finds him frustrating ‘because he is psychological’ (ibid: 3). Ozon ‘should get out of the cave of the mind, with its blood on the walls and bones on the ground, and...just enjoy the sun’ (ibid.).

In *Les Amants criminels* there are multiple allusions to fairy tale, explicit among which is the woodsman's identity as an ogre (Alice whispers 'C'est un ogre!' [He's an ogre!] to Luc when they are first imprisoned in the woodsman's cellar.) Earlier on, when the pair first venture into the woods, they mark their trail exactly as Hansel and Gretel do in the Grimm brothers' story, in order to be able to retrace it later – although since the woodsman tracks them as they do so, fairy-tale good fortune is thwarted. Returning to cinematic genres, the first part of *Les Amants criminels* bears more than a passing resemblance to a sequence of 'violent lovers on the run' films that goes back at least as far in film history as *Bonnie and Clyde*, and was particularly successful in the 1990s, with Tony Scott's *True Romance* and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*.

Broader generic modes in which *Regarde la mer* and *Swimming Pool* are respectively caught up are horror and the thriller. Many of Ozon's reviewers comment on the precision and care with which suspense is built in *Regarde la mer*, where the final revelation that Tatiana is a psychopath still has the power to shock. In *Swimming Pool*, however, Ozon nails his generic colours to the mast straightaway, by making his chief character Sarah Morton (Charlotte Rampling's second role for Ozon following the critical and commercial success the duo found with *Sous le sable*) a writer of detective fiction – an obvious homage to women authors such as Patricia Highsmith, P.D James, and Patricia Cornwall. Ozon is on record as identifying closely with the character of Morton (Schilt p.7), and in the same set of remarks, reveals that reflexive commentary on genre is part of *Swimming Pool*'s fabric ('*Swimming Pool* reflects my personal obsessions about creating, and...it's a film about inspiration' (ibid.)). Finally in the catalogue of genres

Ozon manipulates, there is melodrama, which as Fiona Handyside has argued of *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, it is tempting to label 'metageneric': a reflexive performance of the role of genre in cinema' (Handyside p.7). Whether or not Ozon's focus on domesticity and the family renders his cinema essentially melodramatic (this seems to be Handyside's view, whereas I prefer to emphasise the queer politics of Ozon's families, more important for the French context in which the films are made), it is certainly true that Ozon's 'use of genre asserts European cinema as a popular cinema, even as the languages...and formalist occupations of the films would seem to label them as European art-cinema' (Handyside p.1).

Ozon's ability to make entirely accessible and emotionally rich films while simultaneously working at a metacinematic level – on genre in *Gouttes d'eau* and *Swimming Pool*, on stardom in *8 Femmes* – is evidence that any heavy-handedness or crudity perceived (Bonnaud 2001) is due to inadequate appreciation of his singular blend of weighty emotional and sexual material with formal subtlety. Camp and kitsch that lighten dense or tragic action are an integral part of this queer cinema, which includes astonishing moments of wit. One of the best of these occurs near the end of the least successful of his features critically and commercially, *Les Amants criminels*, as Alice and Luc, just freed from the 'ogre's' lair but about to be apprehended by the police, engage in intercourse on a rock by the river that runs through the forest. Intercut with the shots of Luc still trying in vain to prove heterosexual potency are several carefully framed shots of a bird of prey, a hare, a fox, a deer, and a dove, that emphasise the creatures' innocent

wonder, as if out of a Disney film about the natural world.<sup>11</sup> As they look upon the young lovers or are filmed in the foreground with the pair in the background, the startling contrast of these innocent, beautiful animals of the forest with the desperate, ill-matched young criminals is a moment of pure irony and camp artifice in which Ozon sets natural splendour against the entirely non-natural complexity of human sexuality. While unmistakably still sympathizing with his characters, he is distracted by and unable to pass up the opportunity for a knowing formal device. It is this – Ozon’s evenhanded attention to both the complexity and difficulty of human sexuality *and* the capacities of cinema – that constitutes the doubleness of which his career in film has been made, up to now.

### **Conclusion: Ozon the *auteur***

Whether or not Ozon’s films up to *5 x 2* exhibit the kind of thematic coherence sometimes demanded of *auteur* status, there is little doubt that he has generally been received as an *auteur* (albeit tardily and grudgingly by critics such as Bonnaud), both in his native France and internationally. I have implicitly acknowledged this in parts of my discussion, perhaps particularly in ‘Dirty and clean: the threat of the other’, which resembles *auteur*-structuralist criticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the way it finds deep-seated binary oppositions underlying – and therefore arguably structuring – Ozon’s narratives. But if Ozon’s focus on human and usually family dramas, on the couple, and on sexual relations generally, can make it seem as if his cinema is simply continuing to mine the traditional ‘intimiste’ seam of drama still relied upon by a substantial proportion of French cinematic production, there is nothing polite or hide-

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Darren Waldron for putting the name ‘Disney’ to the particular ideological slant of these shots.

bound about Ozon's twist on this tradition, which he has taken into new, more interesting, and sometimes shocking territory – queer territory. Perhaps most significantly where Ozon as *auteur* is concerned, at least three of his features (*Sous le sable*, *8 Femmes*, *Swimming Pool*) have seen audience figures and generated an order of box-office revenue that rival French films considered 'popular' successes, thereby undoing the binary opposition between '*auteur*' and 'popular' cinema. But even if Ozon's appeal has been broad, there is as yet no critical consensus about why his cinema is important or the kind of *auteur* he is. The claim I would make is that he is best understood as France's first mainstream queer filmmaker.

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